

LET'S EXPLORE---

Cape May County



No, this isn't Venice. The "fishing village" is one of several to be found along Sea Isle City's "canals."

BY JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

PEOPLÉ who love the shore for its natural beauty, devoid of beach acrobats, whirring games of chance and myriads of cars, look forward to late September and early October. This is no time of the year to show off a new bathing suit, but it is the ideal time to swim in the ocean—the waves have soaked up sunlight for four months and they now return dividends to the late shore visitor in the form of warm water.

Especially pleasant during the next four weeks will be a week-end visit to the far end of the state, where temperatures are higher and crowds are smaller. Bird lovers will find Cape May County filled with birds preparing for their trip South; swimmers will find the beaches nearly deserted; shell-seekers will find little competition as they shuffle close to the water's edge. Above all, hotels, rooming houses and restaurants will actually be glad to see the visitor: The "take it or leave it" attitude of the Summer shore is replaced with an eager welcome. Week-end accommodations—at low rates—are easy to find.

This is a long trip—as "Let's Explore" trips go—and the motorist should plan to stay overnight although it will not be necessary to make reservations. The round trip is somewhere in the neighborhood of 400 miles, depending on where the start is made, and with possible deviations suggesting themselves along the way, two days is not too much time to allow. A visit to Cape May has been planned at this time to allow the North Jersey visitor, who seldom gets to this section of the coast, to make the trip without worrying about overcrowded hotels or eating places.

Route 9-4, stretching all the way

down the coast, takes the North Jersey visitor quickly to Cape May County. Just north of Absecon watch carefully for the route to veer right off what appears to be the main road. About 10 miles south of Absecon the roads twist into a maze, but signs will clearly point the way to Somers Point and Ocean City.

SOMERS POINT traffic circle is as close to alcoholic saturation as possible. Ocean City laws forbids the sale of intoxicating liquors, so the dealers have transferred operations just outside the city. Only the north side of the circle is tavernless—none can encroach on the property of the historic Somers Mansion, ancestral home of Master Commandant Richard Somers.

Somers, commander of U. S. S. In-

trepid, was assigned in 1804 to battle the Turks at Tripoli. His vessel drew heavy fire. Suddenly it caught fire, then disintegrated in a sudden explosion, killing Somers and 12 others. One story says Somers feared capture of his ship and deliberately set fire to the powder magazine with a lighted lantern. The house, completely reconverted by the Atlantic County Historical Society, contains an excellent collection of furniture and historic documents. It is open every day except Monday from 10-12 A. M. and 1-5 P. M. and on Sundays from 2-5 P. M. The admission price is 10 cents.

Ocean City, on the north end of a long island, boasts the advantages of both the ocean and Great Egg Harbor. Four Methodist clergymen in 1879 chose this spot as the site for a camp meeting location and formed the

Ocean City Association. Ingeniously, by a process of cross-deeding, the association secured control of every inch of the island. Some owners would not sell but permitted their deeds to be altered to include the association's prohibition of intoxicants and the group's enjoinder of "a proper Sunday observance." Even today transfers of titles are always made to the association's restrictions.

BURIED deep in the sands on Ocean City's beach (at 14th street) is an estimated \$500,000 worth of cargo left when the four-masted barque *Sindia* was wrecked on a stormy December night in 1901. A rust-encrusted rudder post still marks the spot and until the hurricane of September, 1944, a single mast with frayed steel cables also rose from the sand to recall the story of the *Sindia*.

The *Sindia*, which was carrying Christmas goods to New York from Japan, was ending an arduous six months voyage when officers mistook the lights of Ocean City for Sandy Hook and began a celebration in the captain's cabin at the height of a raging northeastern storm. Suddenly mountainous waves drove the ship aground onto a sand bar where it remained firmly embedded for 47 years. The crew was rescued but attempts to remove the cargo, estimated then at \$1,000,000, proved so costly that less than half was taken ashore. At the time the bar was far out to sea. Since then shifting sands have filled in the intervening water and have piled high over the wreck. Now only at high tide does the ocean come anywhere near the *Sindia*'s grave.

"The Flight of the Gull," the ocean drive all the way to the tip of the

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Historic Somers Mansion on the north side of the Somers Point traffic circle. It is the ancestral home of Master Commandant Richard Somers who led U. S. S. Intrepid in 1804 Tripoli battle.

Part of Cape May's waterfront, the history of which goes back to Sir Henry Hudson, its discoverer. At one time ships from all over the world visited harbor to replenish fresh water.



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state, is picked up in Ocean City and can be followed by watching for the blue and white gull signs. Public relations men describe this drive as "primordial, pristine, untrammelled and untouched by man's ambitions." Flashing neon lights at some points indicate "man's ambition" may be more manifest than the publicists believe, but the 35-mile route to Cape May will bring agreement that compared to the commercialism of the Garden State beaches this section of New Jersey is indeed primitively beautiful.

This year for the first time the "Gull" route is complete. In August the bridge over Corson's inlet was opened to traffic, the last of the four toll (20-cent) bridges between Ocean City and Cape May. Beyond the bridge a stop at the "fishing villages" along Sea Isle City's "canals" is recommended. Local literature says the canals were "patterned after the canal system in Venice," but any one looking for gondolas and striped poles will be disappointed.

However, any one seeking "New England atmosphere" will be well repaid by stopping. Drying nets, empty lobster pots, the sounds of boat building, the rigging of ships jutting over unpainted fishing houses combine to establish a New England feeling. These are commercial fishermen, to whom the ocean is a serious business. Early in the morning, about 4 A. M., the boats leave the canals, travel the inland waterway and head for the open sea. Then, at about 9:30 A. M. the "pound" fishermen (those who have areas marked off for trapping fish) return. The rest sail back early in the afternoon.

SALT marshes extend far off to the right of the "Gull" route, broken only by the inland waterway. An occasional ship meanders up the waterway with high grasses making it appear the boat is moving through a field. In fact, local people say: "There goes another one, cutting grass." Telephone poles traverse the marshes and many of them are topped by huge bird nests. Cape May County, loved by the Audubon Society, is visited every Fall and Spring by hundreds of bird fanciers. More than 200 different birds have been

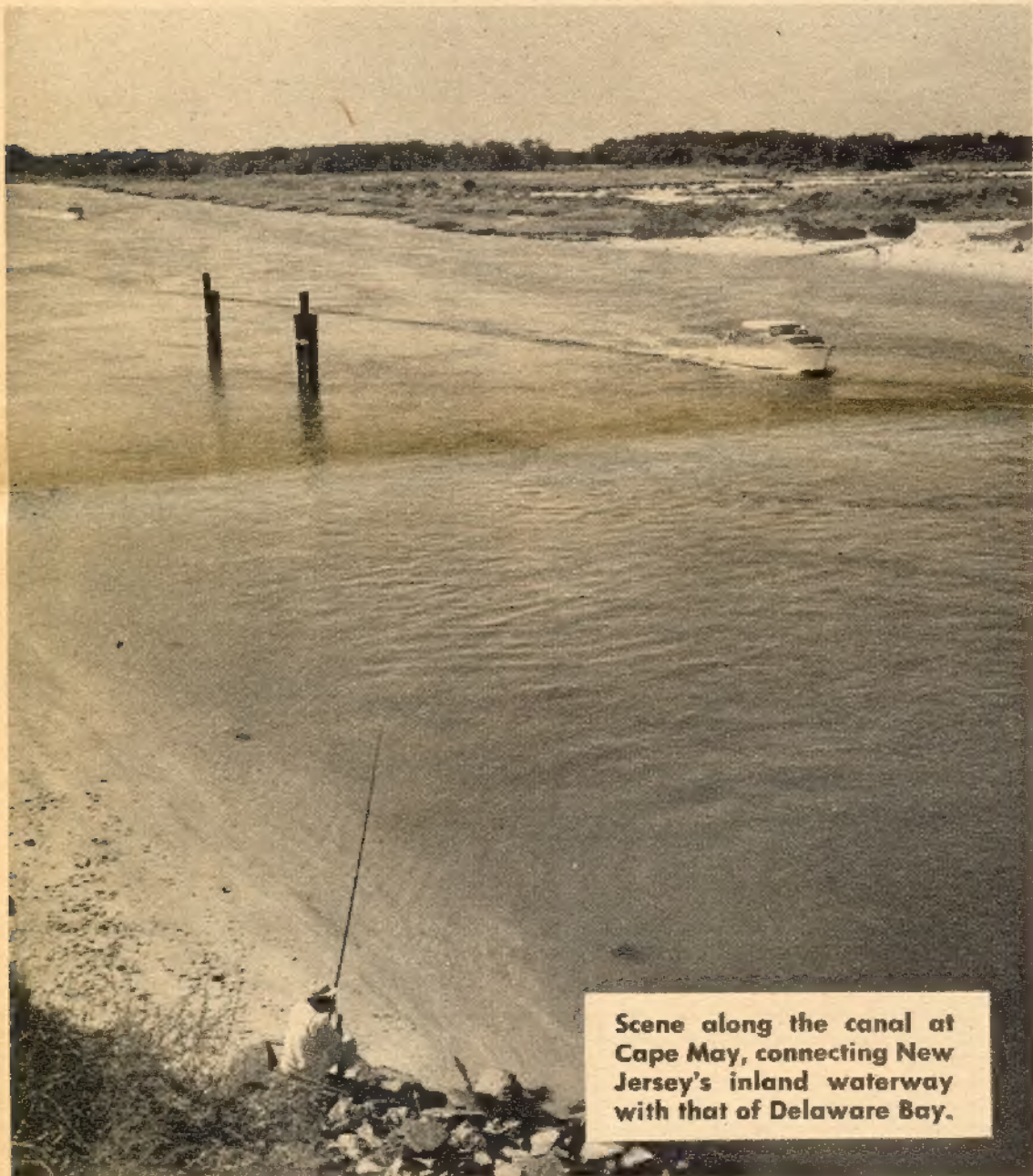
listed in the county and ornithologists agree the variety of birds in Cape May is as great as anywhere in the country.

Cape May City is an obvious goal, although Wildwood's remarkable beach should be visited. The sands stretch flat and hard far out into the ocean, with the drop as gradual as any along the East Coast. People in Cape May grumble "Wildwood has our beach," blaming jetties for pulling sand from Cape May and depositing it at Wildwood.

Cape May was discovered by Sir Henry Hudson from the Half Moon in 1609, and there is good reason to believe every previous mariner who sailed along the Atlantic Coast must have noted the jutting cape. Then, in 1621, Cornelius Jacobsen Mey explored the shoreline for the Dutch West India Company and from him came the name of the cape, the city and the county. Later emigrants from New England, many of whom had come over on the Mayflower, settled at Cape May. Some genealogists claim there are more Mayflower descendants in Cape May County than in New England. It is said that more than a third of Cape May City's population is descended from the Mayflower passengers.

Naturally the sea shaped Cape May's development. First whalers used the shores to sally into Delaware Bay. Early writers tell of "prodigious, nay vast quantities" of "oyle and whalebone" brought into Cape May around 1685. Once the ocean was the only contact with the outside world—cedar forests cut the county off from the rest of the state until 1707 when a road was built to Burlington. Ships anchored in the harbor from all over the world to refill their fresh water casks. Pirates stole ashore at night to forage for food and to secure water.

SEA battles off the coast were frequent during both the Revolution and the War of 1812. Many times small British landing parties sought to force their way ashore and sharp pitched battles often resulted. The English especially sought the fresh water at Cape May and finally, during the Revolution, residents became so exasperated with British taking water from Lilly Lake near Cape May



Scene along the canal at Cape May, connecting New Jersey's inland waterway with that of Delaware Bay.

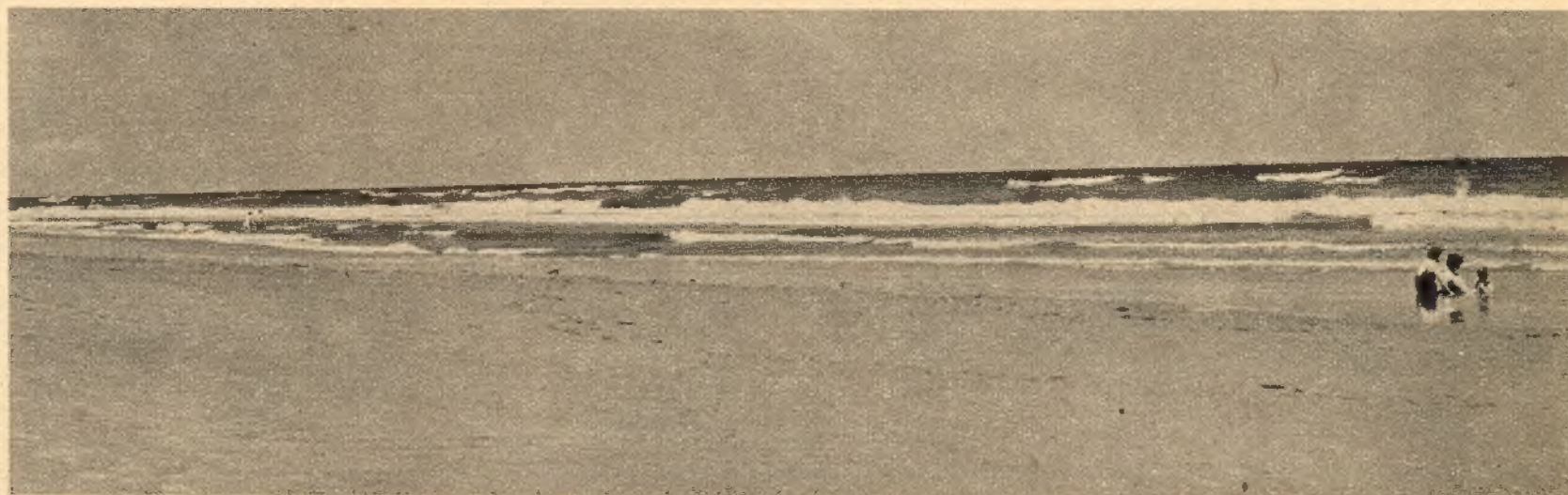


The newly-opened bridge over Corson's Inlet, one of four toll spans between Ocean City and Cape May.

**South Jersey Shore as
Late Summer Playground
Offers Much to Interest
Visitors on Lookout for
History and Recreation.**



Wildwood's popular beach and boardwalk contrasted with almost deserted oceanfront typical of beaches north of Cape May. Former's gain is attributed to action of jetties which has pulled sand from Cape.



The skyline at Cape May Point with its famous old lighthouse built in 1859,

Point that they dug a ditch to the ocean and let the salt water rush in to spoil the lake.

Sailors who stopped at Cape May carried away impressions of the pleasant climate and the general restful nature of the area and even before 1800 vacationists came to seek health in the waters of the ocean. Then, at the dawn of the 19th Century Cape May's popularity as a "watering place" boomed. In 1801 Ellis Hughes advertised in The Philadelphia "Daily Aurora" that he had accommodations for those who sought "a delightful spot to retire to in the hot season." The "accommodations" were a huge room, divided at night by a large sheet with men sleeping on one side and women on the other.

The first real hotel, however, was Congress Hall, built in 1818. It still stands, although several times rebuilt. The War of 1812 interfered only slightly with the growth as a resort and hotels sprang up. The Civil War stopped activity and disastrous fires in 1868 and 1878 destroyed most of the city but demand always brought a ready rebuilding of the hotels. Cape May once was even more thriving than today—Summer visitors could go to a race track, visit one of several open gambling houses or watch bicycle and automobile races on the hard-packed sand.

IN 1903 Henry Ford and other of the early automobile pioneers gathered to race over the sand, then as hard packed as the beach at Daytona Beach, Fla. Ford, according to local historians, arrived with three experimental cars but little cash. Daniel Focer, local merchant, loaned Ford money with one of the cars as security. The races ended, Ford left Cape May, but Focer's faith was rewarded later by his receiving the first Ford agency in the world. The car left as security remained in Focer's show window until about 10 years ago when it was returned to Ford after the agency changed hands. Ford also mulled over the possibility of establishing his factory at Cape May instead of in Detroit, and until a few years ago his company owned land on the cape.

Seven Presidents have visited Cape May, many of them having main-

tained cottages there. The visitor who caused the most excitement, however, was Henry Clay. When Clay reached the resort in 1847 frenzied women admirers chased him over the beach and when they caught him they used sewing scissors to snip curls from his head. Abraham Lincoln visited Cape May before he was President. He created no excitement then, but his signature is today proudly displayed on an old hotel register.

Cape May Point, about three miles west of Cape May City, is famous for its old lighthouse. A light was first erected on the point by the British in 1744, replaced in 1823 by another light, which in turn gave way in 1859 to the present lighthouse. The 170-foot tower is 27 feet in diameter at the base and its light is visible for 19 miles. During the war gun emplacements were placed around the light by the Coast Artillery, one of several gun locations along the coast. High concrete observation towers built during the war can also be seen at various locations on the cape. The necessity for these was borne out by trouble from enemy submarines.

Beyond the lighthouse, on Sunset Beach, three things vie for attention: The sunken concrete ship, the huge tanks of the Northwest Magnesite Co. and the spreading Witmer Stone Wild Life Sanctuary.

The concrete ship is the "Atlantus," discarded in Chesapeake Bay after the first World War. A company seeking to establish a ferry to Delaware acquired the ship, towed it to the present location and dynamited it to form a part of the proposed ferry slip. The project fell through but the ship remained—as a landmark and as a convenient wall for an advertiser.

The magnesite plant was begun about five years ago to use natural magnesium in the water. Water pumped from the ocean is stored in vast circular tanks, magnesium is extracted and mixed with dolomite limestone to form fire-resistant refractory bricks. Cape May is one of the few places where the process can be undertaken at reasonable cost.

Across the street from the plant is the wild life sanctuary, a favorite Fall gathering spot of the Audubon Society. Here thousands of migrat-

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This rust-encrusted rudder post over a sand-covered wreck marks grave of the Sindia which ran aground at Ocean City during storm in 1901.



Congress Hall, Cape May's first hotel. Erected in 1819, it was rebuilt several times to keep pace with resort's growth in the 19th Century.

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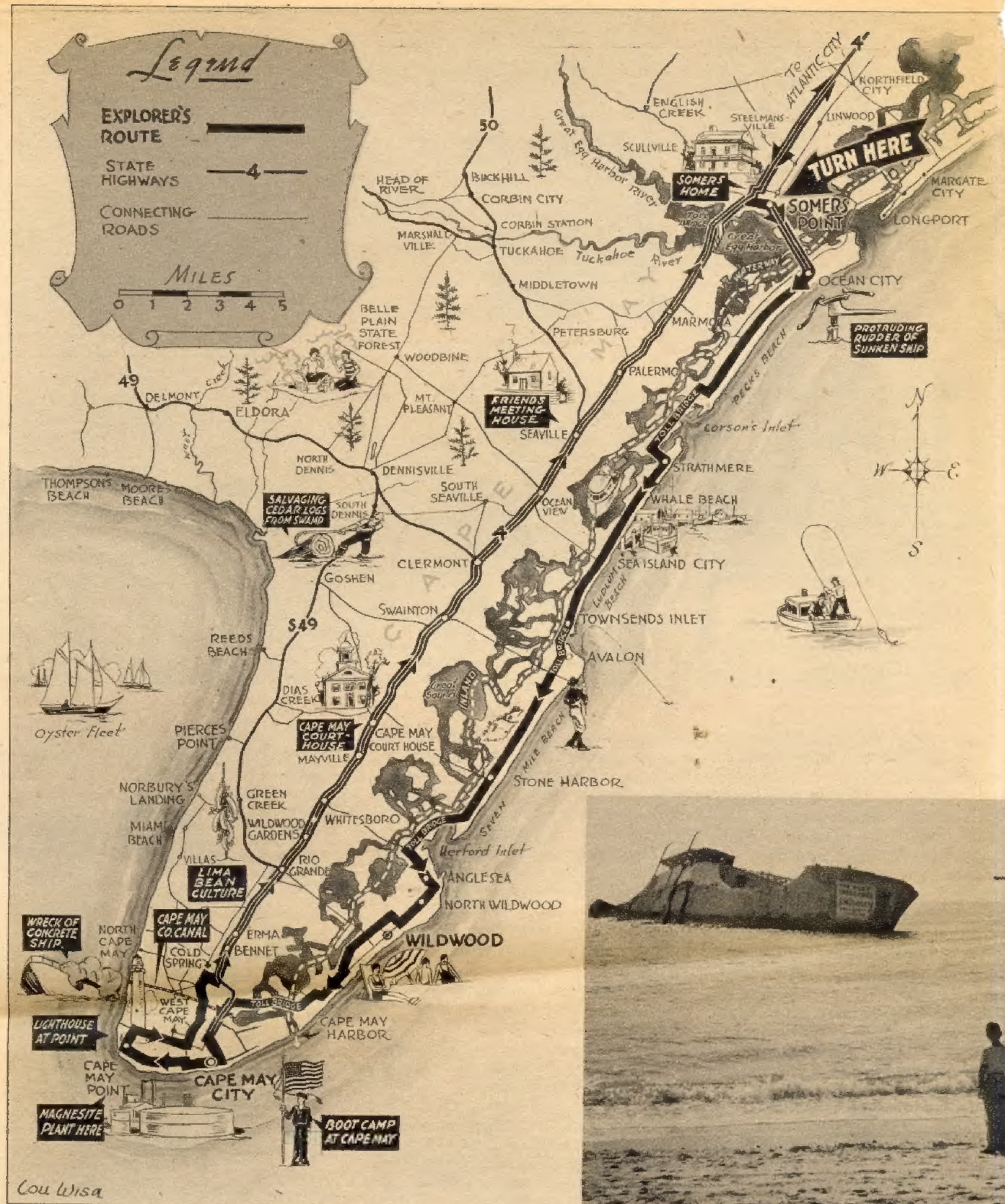
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ing birds rest before undertaking the long flight southward across Delaware Bay.

ROUTE 9-4 is the straight way home from the cape. Cold Springs, off to the left from the main road just beyond the big Cape May Harbor, is worth a stop. Founded in 1714, rebuilt in 1823, the red brick Cold Springs Presbyterian Church centers in an early-settled area. Fields surrounding the church and for several miles north to Cape May Court House are largely given over to lima bean growing. Unique bean-shelling machines which prepare the vegetables for frozen food concerns line the roads.

Center of interest in Cape May Court House is the splendidly preserved old Court House, built in 1849 to replace an early building erected in 1755. Exactly a year was required to build the Court House and settlers in 1849 thought the cost of \$6,284 was perhaps a shade expensive. Of course carpenters had then pushed their wages up to \$1.80 per day and the 331-pound bell cost \$99, but residents even then had taxpayer's jitters.

Several of the county seat's buildings have "dug-up" shingles on their roofs. About 50 years the region around Dennisville—northwest of the Court House—was the center of a unique shingle-mining industry. Some one discovered big white cedar trunks were seasoned after decades of immersion in the water. The trees were dragged to the surface, sawed into shingle lengths and then split into shingles. Once the Independence Hall roof in Philadelphia was covered with "dug-up" shingles from Dennisville.

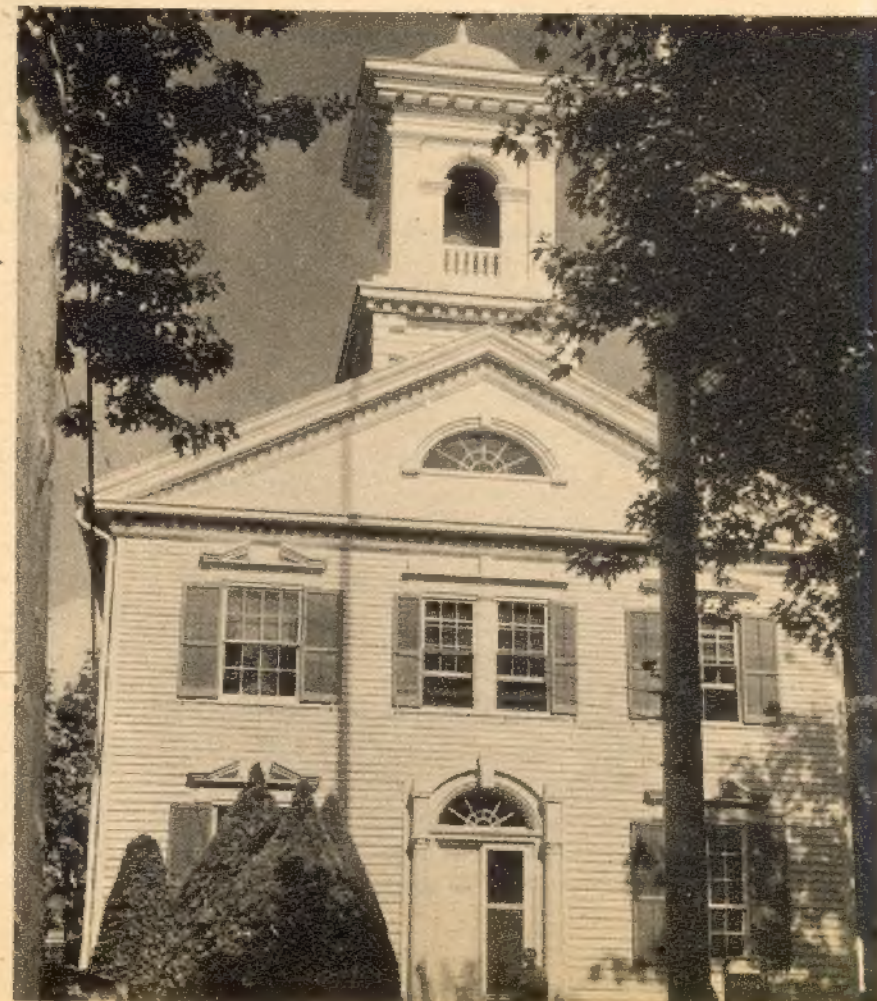
At Seaville, close to the top of Cape May, a tiny old Friends Meeting House is in a field to the left. Still used, the frame house was built in 1716 by Quakers. Straight simple wooden furniture in the building maintains the Friends' tradition of severe church atmosphere. Beyond, Route 9-4 crosses Great Egg Harbor on a long toll bridge, and the way is open for the return north.



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Ideal at this time of year is a trip to Cape May County which juts into the Atlantic like a miniature Florida. One of its "sights" is the grounded concrete ship "Atlantus" (inset) which was to serve as a terminal for abandoned Delaware ferry project.



ABOVE: Simple frame structure built by Quakers in 1716, the Friends Meeting House still remains a Seaville landmark.

RIGHT: The old Court House at Cape May Court House, county seat. Built in 1849 it replaced court erected in 1755.

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